

Franco Serblin Ktêma

As boutique Italian brand Franco Serblin prepares to boost its range we look at the iconic flagship
 Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

Franco Serblin, who passed away in 2013, first unveiled his flagship Ktêma in 2010. He had left Sonus faber, which he founded in 1983, in 2006, so the Ktêma was in development for nearly five years before he felt it was ready to be sold by the new company bearing his name. I remember the tension during its gestation, and Franco's elation at being able to produce a no-compromise system – not that he was ever restrained at Sonus faber. Think of the phenomenal Extrema, Guarneri and Stradivarius. The wait for the Ktêma proved worth it – as did the anticipation lasting a decade to hear a pair in my own system.

Why the delay in the full *HFN* treatment of this system? Whatever hindered the distribution here, we in the UK now have full access to this company, having looked at the *Accordo* two years ago [*HFN* Jan '18]. Renewed efforts and a discernible buzz about the brand thus justify our examination of this £25k-per-pair flagship system – its longevity marking it as a classic-in-the-making.

WHIFF OF LUXURY

We reviewed the Ktêma in Satin Sycamore, which would look simply wonderful in some open-architecture cabin with lots of woodwork, while those after a more tech-y feel can opt for high-gloss piano black. Both are capped and shod with hand-polished aluminium top and bottom plates, the latter accepting four superbly-finished, adjustable spikes. They're threaded, with caps on the top, so the attention to detail pays off in the absence of typically ugly, black anodised spikes which look like someone bought them in bulk at B&Q. By contrast, the Ktêma rests on bejewelled feet.

Installing them is a two-person effort as they weigh 55kg apiece and you do not want to mar the sublime finishes. They actually arrive protected by velvet drawstring covers, reminiscent of limited-edition champagne, costly perfumes and fine watches. This is what high-end audio should convey: the same whiff of luxury we associate with other artisan creations, and the Ktêma lets you see, feel and hear where your money went.

TRIPLE ARCH

Once out of the boxes, don't rush to install the spikes. I recommend positioning the speakers before fitting them, even though they also come with small metal coasters to protect wooden or tiled floors. The coasters are rubber underneath, so do not slide, but positioning prior to spiking and marking the locations with tape is advisable regardless of floor surface.

Unlike the Sonus fabers of Franco's day, the Ktêma's toe-in isn't intended to form a triangle that crosses just in front of the hot seat, but work best aimed precisely at the listening position, so that turning one's head to look at each speaker results in a face-on view of the baffle and drivers.

Franco's obsession was all about recreating the space of a live event. This, in turn, explains the unusual shape of the Ktêma and its almost-triangular footprint culminating in a severely narrow baffle only 170mm wide. That's narrower than an LS3/5A. The speaker spreads to

RIGHT: Behind a tensioned 'elastic band' grille lies a 28mm Ragnar Lian soft-dome tweeter and two 100mm midrange drivers. Bass is handled by two 230mm alloy-coned woofers that vent from the lower rear/side of the cabinet



FRANCO SERBLIN

As recounted in our *Accordo* review [*HFN* Jan '18], I considered Franco Serblin a mentor – thanks especially to his thoughts on soundstage recreation – but even I couldn't anticipate a belated revival in recognition of his contribution to speaker design. As has been said many times (and not just by me), Franco did more to influence the appearance of dynamic speakers through his first brand, Sonus faber, than any designer since the early 1980s. We owe domestically-acceptable speaker aesthetics largely, if not solely to him, seen first in the Sonus faber Snail and concurrently with cabinets he made for Cizek Audio Systems.

Staying true to his design philosophy with his eponymous brand, Franco made the Ktêma and other models with more extreme overall forms than he produced for Sonus faber. His signature criteria continue in the use of real wood in solid staves, furniture-grade finishes, rounded surfaces to create sculptural, pleasing-to-the-eye forms, unusual grilles culminating in the 'strings' which grace both Sonus faber and Serblin speakers, tapered-back enclosures, leather-clad baffles and integral stands in unusual materials. This is both visionary, and inspirational.

400mm across the rear, while front-to-back it's 460mm deep. And they like to breathe, so allow at least 0.5m from all walls.

Franco dubbed the construction a 'triple arch cabinet structure'. It is made from thin layers of wood and aliphatic glue 'hot pressed' together, all chosen to control enclosure resonances. That narrow front baffle, Franco told me, 'was reduced to the physical limit of the driver dimensions'. He felt that it was necessary 'in order to offer the smallest surface possible for the untrammelled dispersion of midrange and high frequencies'.

Another benefit is the 'improved transmission of the radiated energy'. This is all part of his quest to recreate a proscenium effect, and I have to admit I have never heard a non-panel speaker that 'disappears' like the Ktêma. There are simply no clues to the presence of a cabinet-type enclosure.

A vertical array comprising a 28mm soft-dome tweeter above two custom-made, 100mm midrange units resides in a step-compensated baffle, in what the company calls 'a cardioid acoustic-resistance configuration'. For some reason, I fantasised about the company issuing that driver array in a 45cm-tall standmount enclosure to fill the gap between the *Accordo* mini-monitor and the

111cm-tall Ktêma – not too far a stretch as the mids, fitted in their own 'double aperiodic' sub-structure, could easily extend below the 135Hz where they meet the woofers [see PM's Lab Report, p39].

A brace of these custom-made, compression-loaded 230mm metal cone drivers fires out of the back of each tower. The woofers are covered by a slotted rear panel with vents at the sides, which force the sound outward. Those with recall for hi-fi trivia will remember that the original *Extrema* [*HFN* Jul '14] was fitted with a metal plate standing proud of its rear-firing KEF B139 woofer to similar effect.

Franco described this configuration as the 'waveguide that characterises

the Ktêma system'. It

was his desire for the low frequencies to help support the goal to 'physically recall what we see in a real proscenium, where the soloists are at the front of the stage, while the

rest of the orchestra is at the back'. While very low frequencies are largely omni-directional here, most of the energy is guided along the convex sides of the speaker, with only a small fraction transmitted directly through the rear, via the slits in the back panel.

A SOUND FOR LIFE

As the speakers' cabling throughout is Yter's pure silver-palladium mono wiring, I used the same for the review. Connection was straightforward via superbly-made binding posts. And there was an instant discovery, which concurred with PM's findings [p39]: the imagined ease-of-driving suggested by the 4ohm impedance and

'This speaker truly walks the walk and talks the talk'

LOUDSPEAKER

92dB sensitivity was optimistic. While I barely got the needles on the D'Agostino Momentum Stereo [HFN Jul '11] to flicker (and the sensitivity for the meters was set to 'high'), the Ktêmas love a lot of juice... and enjoy delivering realistic levels.

That's not to say that the Ktêmas cannot whisper, for they excel at low levels. They seemed to operate independently of pure SPLs, and the grilles – which Franco told me were inspired by violin strings – have absolutely no effect on the sound. If you

can hear the difference, I will give you a bottle of Barolo. But the need for loads of power in reserve was manifested in the way the lower registers behaved, especially regarding control and slam.

I found this amusing, because Franco designed his loudspeakers more for finesse than force. The percussion in the remastered *Abbey Road* [Apple 02577 92112; CD/Blu-ray box] made some visitors jump visibly in their seats, the weight and scale so rich and substantial it was hard to credit even two pairs of 230mm woofers. But it was the control and transient attack which proved even more dazzling than the extension or bass quantity. Ringo's break at the tail-end of 'Carry That Weight' had nearly the impact of that legendary release, *The Sheffield Drum Record*. Yes, it was that vivid, especially its stage width and cavernous front-to-back depth.

LIFE CHANGING

When dealing with the Ktêma, though, one needs to keep in mind the *raison d'être*, which is the spatial element, in the same way that one considers a Lotus for handling or a Ferrari for speed. I put on Ray Anthony's admittedly schmaltzy *Dancing Over The Waves* [Capitol ZC-87], a 7½ips, ½-track tape from 1958 possessing the finest big band pedigree, firing up my treasured Denon DH-710F open-reel deck in order to savour it.

It proved room-filling in a way that I've only heard before from the likes of Apogee's Scintilla in 1ohm mode, via 200W Krell monoblocks, or Wilson XLFs in founder Dave's own listening room. Highs were crisp without being aggressive, airy and gossamer-like with no lack of precision or definition, and more-ish enough to inspire playing a half-dozen LPs into the wee hours. One can't avoid the term 'silky' because that's what you get: a glossy sheen that's so un-hi-fi-like, so organic you begin to understand what authenticity means by 2020 standards. ↻

LEFT: Side view of the concave, satin sycamore side cheeks with subtle venting for the midrange drivers. The two alloy woofers are 'compression loaded' against the convex rear panel [see p39] exhausting from the sides

MASSIMILIANO FAVELLA

Massimiliano Favella, owner of Laboratorium, the manufacturer of Franco Serblin loudspeakers, Yter cables and Flexum acoustic panels, began his audio career in 1995 at Sonus faber. His last two years at the Italian speaker giant was spent working with Franco, his father-in-law, in the R&D department before leaving in 2001 and setting up Laboratorium a couple of years later.

'In 2010 Laboratorium produced Franco's final loudspeakers, the Ktêma and Accordo', recounts Massimiliano. 'The latter are permanently set up at Mozart's birth place in Salzburg, so visitors have the opportunity to listen to his masterpieces through the Accordo'.

Franco passed away in 2013 since which time Laboratorium has continued his legacy, finalising the Ligne project in 2016 and the Accordo Essence floorstander in 2018. 'Over the years we have maintained Franco's "Modus Operandi" in our R&D', says Massimiliano, 'using high quality electronic components and precious wood with harmonious shapes.'

'In order to maintain the highest quality standard, Laboratorium releases only a few loudspeakers – our production and QC is very time-consuming. Of course new projects will be announced in the future, in fact we are working on a new design at this moment, but it takes time to reach a good result. In truth it is not easy to carry on Franco's name, but I can affirm that the value we give to things is also the meaning we put into them, and reflects the profound esteem I always had of Franco.'

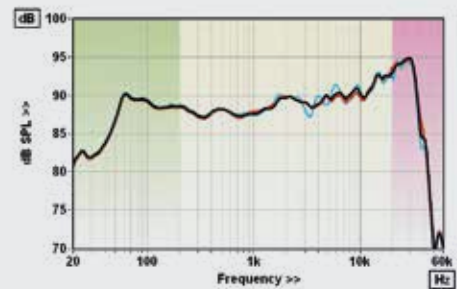


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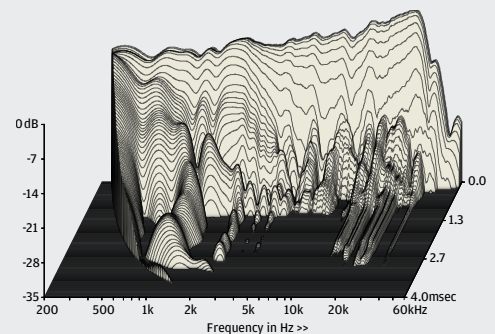
FRANCO SERBLIN KTÊMA

The front-facing midrange drivers in this four-way flagship segue into the two rear-facing woofers at 135Hz, the upper mid cone extending its reach to 1.15kHz before crossing to the 28mm soft-dome tweeter. There's an increase in distortion from <1% through bass and treble to ~2% at this same midband frequency, and a resonant mode too [see CSD Graph 2, below], but this is quickly dissipated. Bass is well extended down to 25Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) but the corrected, summed nearfield measurements [green area, Graph 1] were complicated by the combined reflex ports and side-venting – the alloy woofers peak at 66Hz while the dual ports are tuned to 60Hz with a useful output down to 20Hz (-3dB). Measured on the treble axis, the forward response shows a boosted mid/presence/treble rising +5.5dB from 1kHz-20kHz, but pair matching is an impressive 0.8dB, improving to 0.6dB from 200Hz-5kHz [black/red traces, Graph 1]. Leaving the elastic grille strands in place [blue trace] reveals ±1.5dB 'ripples' appearing between 2.5-6kHz. Audible? See Ken's listening notes!

Serblin's rated 92dB sensitivity is a trifle optimistic unless a full 200Hz-20kHz range is included in the measurement, the high treble lift boosting it to 89.1dB. Otherwise, the 1kHz/2.83V/1m figure is 87.7dB and the mean from 500Hz-8kHz closer to 88.8dB. It's unlikely the Ktêma will be partnered with an asthmatic amplifier, but it remains a reasonably current hungry load to drive. Serblin's quoted minimum of 3.2ohm was proved on test at 27Hz but there's a further drop to 2.8ohm at a very high 20kHz. Phase angles are moderate at +24°/-28° but the *maximum* impedance is just 8.0ohm/860Hz. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Resonances are quickly suppressed with low-level modes remaining at 1.5kHz and 20-30kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V - 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	87.7dB / 88.8dB / 87.0dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	2.8ohm @ 20kHz 8.0ohm @ 860Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	-28° @ 5.1kHz 24° @ 415Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz-20kHz)	0.8dB / ±2.9dB/±3.3dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	25Hz / 35kHz/36kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 2.1% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1110x425x460mm / 55kg



LEFT: Behind this false cabinet rear lie two 230mm alloy-coned, relex-loaded bass units that vent out from the sides of the cabinet [see p37]. Crossover does not support bi-wiring/amping so single 4mm cable terminals are fitted

same time serving up heart-stoppingly, undamped, lightning-quick transients.

All of you know what I mean: balancing the necessary liquidity of bottleneck, slide, Hawaiian or other flowing guitar forms with the punctuation of the rapidly-plucked notes. One visitor was shocked to see a soft-dome tweeter, marvelling that it could have the sort of speed now associated with metal domes or ribbon tweeters. But Franco was a true maestro and he coaxed just the right quantities of both. Throw in two distinct vocal types and you have a speaker that walks the walk and talks the talk.

If ever a loudspeaker designer left us with a swan song to be sung by the angels, it's Franco Serblin with his Ktêma. Which, indeed, lives up to the quote from Thucydides that

inspired the name: '*Ktêma es aei* - A possession intended to last for ever'. How so? Simple: I cannot imagine any owner of these speakers ever parting with them. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

It's a challenge to describe how dazzled I am by the Ktêma. A quick demo ain't the same as living with it: you need to 'learn' the Ktêma despite the instantly *simpatico* first impression. It does everything right and nothing wrong. It creates soundscapes - 'soundstage' is too bland a term - suggesting whole audio vistas beyond one's walls. The Ktêma conveys intimacy. It is one of the finest speakers I have ever heard.

Sound Quality: 89%



I sat there thinking that the original purchaser of the *Dancing Over The Waves* tape 62 years ago certainly never heard how good it could sound on contemporary equipment. Even the finest speakers of the era - Quad 57s - couldn't deliver the weight or the level, however gorgeous the midband. This was life-changing.

LIGHTNING QUICK

Turning to vinyl and *BB King & Eric Clapton - Riding With The King* [Reprise 093624895206], the test was the obvious battle of the guitars. In either case, beyond guitar fetishists wanting to identify the makes of guitar and strings, both performers are/were masters of restraint and fluidity on this set. The Ktêmas managed the deft trick of sounding like the audio equivalent of extra virgin olive oil, while at the